

## Challenging the discourse: The importance of 'mantras' for persisting first in family students

Sarah O'Shea<sup>1</sup>, Franziska Lessky<sup>2</sup>, Sally Patfield<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Charles Sturt University, Canberra, Australia. <sup>2</sup>University of Innsbruck, Innsbruck, Austria.

<sup>3</sup>Newcastle University, Newcastle, Australia

### Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

### Abstract

Identifying the reasons why students depart university early remains an enigma across higher education settings. Early departure can have profound impacts for individuals, not only financially but also emotionally and socially. However, if we only focus on understanding why students 'leave' university we miss an important opportunity to consider their rationales for staying. This presentation will report on three studies conducted across the UK, Austria, Ireland and Australia, that considered why learners who are the first in their family to come to university persist in what can often be an alien and complex environment. The combined data points to the recurring theme of the role of 'mantras' or spoken statements in encouraging this persistence. In this session, we will highlight the key mantras that learners drew upon to enact persistence and indicate how they are not only rooted in biography but also contradict and challenge dominant discourses within university.

### Full paper

Globally, university students, particularly those from under-represented groups, continue to depart early from university at significant volume (Sokolova, 2024). Whilst leaving university without qualifications impacts everyone, for those who are the 'first' to attend university, the repercussions can be significantly greater (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). For first-generation or first-in-family (FIF) students, the decision to attend university is rarely straightforward and may mark a radical departure from an expected biography or trajectory. Indeed these 'educational trailblazers' (O'Shea et al., 2023) often have additional pressure to prove that attending university is both possible and doable. This means that a decision to 'drop-out' can reconfigure the perceptions of family, friends, and even communities, impacting decision-making within and between generations (Wainwright & Watts, 2020).

The research featured in this presentation centred on FiF university students from across the UK, Austria, Ireland and Australia. A total of 174 participants from 17 universities engaged in in-depth interviews with questions that considered individual biographies, their rationale for enrolling in the degree and institution, their aspirations and goals, as well as barriers/enablers to achieving these aspirations and goals. Interviews took place either via Zoom, phone, or face-to-face on-campus, and lasted between one to four hours. Whilst these studies were separate, they were complementary, each striving to consider how social structures impact on the persistence of students from equity backgrounds and the necessary 'conversion factors' (Sen, 2002) needed to enable or enact this persistence. Like Sen (2002), we recognised the need to deeply examine the actual freedoms people have to 'formulate capabilities' or valued doings and beings, as it is these conversion factors that allow the necessary resources to be converted into valued or fertile functionings (Sen, 2002, pp. 86-94). This research indicates that one possible conversion factor is through the repetition of 'mantras,' verbalised and/or internalised statements that form a bedrock or foundation to university participation. Our analysis identified three dominant 'mantras of persistence' embedded in the students' narratives and biographies: (1) the mantra of strong work ethic, (2) the mantra of retribution, and (3) the mantra of hopeful learning.

During this presentation, we will consider the implications of such mantras and how these often implicitly contradict what is expected or normalised within dominant university discourses. We will contend that while such mantras are often hidden, these are powerful forces used by learners to overcome the various barriers they encounter when transitioning through university. However, we also consider these mantras critically and highlight how this affective and emotional work often remains invisible within a higher education system that valorises meritocracy and individualism. By adopting a more nuanced sociocultural perspective on the nature of persistence, we highlight how life biographies interact with the university environment in complex ways, to avoid considering persistence only in terms of one-dimensional choices. Equally, if we only contemplated the outcomes of persistence, in this case successful graduation, then this may mask the ways in which learners had to draw upon existing resources to get to the point of graduation.

We challenge current discourse by posing the question as to how the sector can both validate existing mantras but equally create a space for alternative but equally valuable mantras. One example is the importance of validating learners' existing biographies not as a deficit or problem that needs to be fixed but rather as a source of strength and resilience that can have real currency within the university environment. To do this requires interrogation of the current skills and abilities valorised in higher education settings

including attending to whether these are simply reflective of certain class or culturally based assumptions. Arguably enacting alternative, but equally valuable mantras, begins with revisioning our education systems to better nurture the diversity of our student cohorts. Focussing on a pedagogy of care rather than only one of competition, offers the possibility for students to feel like they 'matter' rather than being judged solely on their employability or grade averages. Establishing such parameters starts with not only having a clear understanding of 'who' students are, the complexities of their lives, the strengths they bring with them but also a much better articulated understanding of the purpose of higher education.